United Nations ECE/CES/2018/25

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
5 April 2018

Original: English

Economic Commission for Europe

Conference of European Statisticians
Sixty-sixth plenary session
Geneva, 18–20 June 2018
Item 7 of the provisional agenda
Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication

Towards a new communication strategy for Statistics Belgium

Note by Statistics Belgium

Summary

This document presents a new, user-oriented communication strategy adopted by Statistics Belgium, and the principles followed in its various components, such as branding, communication, value creation, cooperation and promotion of statistical literacy. The strategy aims to respond to the current rapid technological and societal changes and to maintain the relevance of Statistics Belgium in this challenging era. In the final section, the paper gives examples of the first projects implemented under the new strategy.

The document is presented to the Conference of European Statisticians' seminar on "Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication", Session 1: "Strategic communications" for discussion.

GE.18-05364(E)

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I. New challenges to strategic communication

1. Over the last twenty years, a storm has shattered the way the world communicates and this storm is still raging. Traditional media are faltering, social media have conquered a position yet to be defined, and the distinction between knowledge and emotion, factual information and its perception has become unclear. In her keynote speech at the OECD conference in Paris last year, Rahaf Harfoush formulated the consequences of this evolution polemically: "We are creating a culture where the expectation of personalized content is making objectivity redundant."

2. This poses major challenges to everybody concerned with what has been defined as "evidence-based policy", and hence to official statisticians in particular. Should they continue to be the gatekeepers of unshakeable truth or will they have to adapt to the new situation, e.g. by integrating emotional aspects in their storytelling?

3. Harfoush gave an impetus to the discussion by asking five questions:

(a) Are we preaching to the converted?

(b) What tangible goal do we want to see from statistics?

(c) What is our information philosophy?

(d) Are we evolving our networks?

(e) Are we taking advantage of digital culture?

4. At Statistics Belgium, we had already started a discussion on a new communication strategy that would be more user-oriented and take into account technological and societal changes. However, we are well aware that the world could change more rapidly than our strategic discussions would advance. Harfoush's questions could be the background on which to assess if we are still on the right track.

5. On the other hand, resources for ambitious communication projects are rather scarce at Statistics Belgium. This forces us to make very strict and practical choices and focus on essential changes that can be implemented at low cost.

6. In the following, we therefore do not aim at finding a way to make the (statistical) world better, but on a hands-on strategy to stay relevant in a rapidly changing, challenging era.

II. A new communication strategy for Statistics Belgium

A. Creating a brand

7. Creating a brand is the starting point of any good communication. Branding, image building and visibility are essential to a successful communication process. But they are also overly sophisticated words that have to be put into practice.

- Choose a short and powerful name and clearly state what you do. Since January 2018, Statbel has opted for "Statbel, the Belgian statistical office". It worked: newspapers, radio and TV gladly started to use it;
- Be visible and make sure to follow up properly on your logo, name and house style. Tell your partners and stakeholders what you expect from them. Repeat the same message. Keep repeating;

- Link your brand to a number of characteristics you find important, like quality. Use the power of good copywriting to describe yourself in a clear way. Choose for example three key words, the last being the most important. Use your words sparingly but effectively. Make sure that your brand is perceived as a trusted source.

B. External communication

8. External communication seems to be an obvious step. However, reality shows that it is not so obvious. We keep using the word "dissemination" but external communication covers a much wider field. It often starts where dissemination stops. National statistical institutes need a specific organisational structure for external communication. Furthermore, external communication is a mission for your whole organisation while "dissemination" could be a task of one specific team.

- Use all your employees as ambassadors for your external communication. Do not only bring out your figures, but show every day what else you do to produce these figures. Make sure that all the stories of your organisation are told. Show your social impact.

9. The term "dissemination" is a synonym of "spitting out" your data, in only one direction. External communication is at its best a two-way (or multi-sided, network-like) process.

- Communicate your figures and what your organisation does in a clear way;
- Choose the right platforms and listen carefully to what all your target groups have to say;
- Make sure they feel involved, listen to their questions, make sure they actively share your communication and want to be linked to you.

C. Internal communication

10. All good external communication should start with good internal communication. If your employees are not aware of what and how you communicate externally, you cannot expect that they will properly communicate internally or that they will want to be an external ambassador for you.

11. Everyone in a national statistical institute is one way or another an expert in her/his field.

- Use internal expertise, be open to dialogue, start discussions.
- Make sure discussions are properly followed up and be clear about your objectives and expectations.
- Be aware that good internal communication is the best way to prevent crises. Crisis communication can be perfectly prepared, as long as everyone is informed that there is a possible problem. Therefore, be proactive in all your internal communication and expect the same from your employees. This way, you avoid having to find out what is going on when a crisis is in full swing. Never think "It does not happen to me". Be alert and critical, and be aware of your major social impact.

D. Be and stay relevant

- Do not ignore social debates. Be a part of it. Show your value. Show that you are not in an ivory tower.
- You will never be able to be the fastest. Rather take the lead with innovation, transparency and accessibility.
- Show your relevance: share good practices and research that made use of your figures.
- Distribute your figures. You can no longer count on your authority, on people to see it or media to take over. Try to reach your audience directly.
- Develop a network of people and organizations willing to share your messages. Find other ways to get your messages to a wide audience.
- Digital is the new Gutenberg. Explore any innovative channel.
- Use flow and tension in your communication. Tell a story, with beginning, middle and end.
- Ensure that you reach the younger generation: many of them do not use classic news channels anymore.
- Understand the psychology of your relationship with the audience: people are emotional beings and they will look at you with feelings. Find out what these feelings are, how your audience relates to your brand and why they do so and what they would like to see.
- Seek inspiration in general market research in order to know what the main points of interest of your audience are (in Belgium probably money, family or health). Find ways to respond to these interests.
- Collect as many insights and opinions as possible, and adjust your communication accordingly. Be a chameleon. Use what exists, follow insights and reports closely, make sure you apply them actively, avoid being the man of yesterday, do not wait and see.

E. Renew and experiment

- Make time and space for innovation and experiments. Provide a playground for your employees, let them tinker and try in a controlled way. Free time and space act like a relief and can lead to concrete results more quickly than you expected.
- Make sure to pick out the strong elements from marketing, PR and storytelling, and to examine what they can mean for your organisation. Do not be afraid of these more commercial terms, and make sure, in particular, that you can translate them in an authentic way into your own communication and whole organisation.
- Brainstorm, question yourself, make visions in the very long term. Reflect on questions such as "What do we want to be as an NSI? How do we want to and how can we profile ourselves, and to whom? Which people have a role to play in this regard? Which stories can we and do we want to tell, and how?"
- Make space to try something new sometimes, in a controlled way. Make sure to keep an image of an important, qualitative and reliable source, but also of an office open to innovation.

F. Simplify

12. It is certainly important that official statistics be communicated in the right context with the right words. The terms you use, the sets of figures you make only exist for as long as your regular users know what it is all about.

13. However, statistical institutes also have a duty to use a clear language for many other target groups, which is much more difficult. Of course, we all find a nice infographic when it comes to an international beer day. But what about more serious topics? Will we switch back to the standard heavy terms and way of communicating? Here too, more than ever, NSIs need to look for a way to reach different audiences, and to ensure that they see and understand your figures.

- Do not rely solely on the media to communicate figures properly. They are a channel for communication, but to simplify more your own messages gives you the opportunity to better communicate directly with your audience;
- Do not produce your figures for academics and experts only. Look for ways to appeal to other target groups. And take a critical look at them;
- For example, set up a focus group and ask them: if you make an infographic, do they understand what it says? Is it attractive for them? How would they want you to communicate? How can you ensure that you reach not only the interested intellectual elite, but also all other layers of society? When you develop a new communication product, do you test it with the audience you want? Or do you only assume that this product is necessary?

G. Value

- Use the expertise you have in-house and be proud of it;
- Make sure to give your organisation and your figures a face, by letting a number of experts speak and by presenting them in pictures;
- But: choose experts who feel comfortable enough to do it, and make sure that it remains manageable. Let the expert know what you expect from him, how he can properly convey certain things. Do not wait for the first TV interview to train him;
- Make your own press videos, write articles as if they were for the newspaper, make analyses in which the expert is given the floor.

H. Cooperate

- Partner for success.
- Look for partnerships, and get off the beaten paths. You do not have to find or do everything by yourself.
- Collaborate, broaden your projects, and be open to external influences within a clear framework.
- Look for partners who can strengthen your message. Negotiate your partnership and ensure that everyone emerges stronger.
- Evaluate afterwards and adjust where necessary. Do not be afraid and look more actively for national and international opportunities for collaboration.

I. Promote statistical literacy

14. Statistical literacy has been widely discussed as a lever to enhance popular involvement in and support for official statistics. However, more agreements and objectives could be reached internationally in this regard.

- Do not see statistical literacy as a goal in itself but as a hat under which you can take many actions.
- Do not start on your own. Go outside, look what happens, inquire about the needs of teachers, for example.
- Make sure that you can respond with innovative products.
- Particularly interesting partnerships are just around the corner: with influencers who have many followers or with organisations that are already very active in the field and bring a lot of experience. Collaborate within the framework of your own objectives. Inspire and strengthen one another with one common general interest: a better understanding of official statistics.

III. First realisations and projects under the new strategy

15. Statistics Belgium has already developed or is developing some communication projects that fit into this new strategy:

(a) A news-centred and user-friendly website:

- The project of the new website was developed from the start in collaboration with an external consultant. This company organised panel discussions with several of our stakeholders and users, which resulted in a completely new web architecture. Usability is paramount in our new, news-centred website. Every update is released with a news message, the size of which is a function of the importance of the topic;
- Figures can be easily found on the same page as the news release, in different file types (open data, interactive database or "simple" Excel file) alongside the metadata files explaining the definitions;
- The new website turned out to be a real game changer for Statistics Belgium. Statisticians were challenged to create new types of texts and to focus on the most important aspect in their releases. A dedicated section of the website was given to the teams that are collecting the data, in order to reach their audiences directly, and to offer direct links to FAQs and online surveys. Overall, the information that Statistics Belgium provides is now clear and easy to access.

(b) At the beginning of 2018, Statistics Belgium launched its own brand: Statbel – Belgium in figures. This name and new logo were created to emphasize our professional independence. At the same time, the logo and name help us to gain more visibility for our organisation and our figures. All documents were adapted and a sentence 'the Belgian statistical office' was added in press releases. This had a great impact. Before, our figures were quoted under several names (or 'brands'), but since January, journalists consistently use "Statbel", in most of the cases with "the Belgian statistical office".

(c) The domain of statistical literacy is being intensively researched during 2018. A working group has been launched within Statistics Belgium and is developing several projects at the same time. On one hand, a new and experimental tool for children between 8 and 12 year (primary schools) will be developed. On the other hand, possibilities and

existing projects within secondary education (12-18 year) will be researched. This working group will give advice to Statistics Belgium on opportunities in the field of statistical literacy, not only to start projects on itself, but also to use existing networks, projects and possible partnerships.

(d) More interactive tools and visualisations. In June 2018, we will present an interactive, user-friendly tool to show figures about all municipalities in Belgium. Users will be able to compare easily municipalities or cities with one another, or to compare with regions or the entire country.